

## **United Arab Emirates: The Middle East's Nuclear Golden Child?**

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A Google search for the phrase ‘middle east nuclear program’ yields numerous articles and discussions on the nuclear programmes of Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. Unsurprisingly, Iran is the most prominent search result given the current negotiations between the country and the P5+1 over its nuclear programme. Interest in Israel’s highly suspected but as yet unacknowledged nuclear weapons programme has risen recently. This followed a [proposal](#) at the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty Review Conference that would encourage steps to make the Middle East a nuclear weapon free zone, potentially compromising Israel’s strategic ambiguity. And recent [comments](#) by a handful of high-ranking officials suggesting Saudi Arabia may pursue nuclear weapons to combat Iran’s growing influence have captured international attention.

However, for those closely watching Middle Eastern nuclear programmes, one country seems conspicuously absent from these results - the United Arab Emirates (UAE). As of June 6<sup>th</sup> 2015, the one mention of the UAE’s rapidly developing nuclear energy programme in the first 32 pages of Google results is on page five, indicating how little attention the country’s nuclear ambitions have received within broader public discourse and popular media. The irony of this lack of attention is that the UAE is arguably pursuing the most transparent and well-documented Middle Eastern nuclear programme to date.

The UAE first announced its ambition to develop a nuclear energy program in [2008](#), citing rising domestic electricity demands and the energy security and sustainability nuclear energy could provide. In quick succession two agencies, the [Emirati Nuclear Energy Corporation](#) (ENEC) and the [Federal Authority for Nuclear Regulation](#) (FANR), were established to oversee and implement the programme. A signatory of the NPT since 2003, the UAE signed the Additional Protocol with the IAEA in 2009. Subsequently, a location for four future reactors was chosen, and bids were solicited,

with a Korean consortium led by KEPCO selected to construct four nuclear reactors. Construction has started on three of the four reactors, with the first scheduled to come online in 2017.



Concrete dome for the Unit 1 Reactor Containment Building at Barakah.

Source: [Ventures Onsite](#).

Since the inception of its programme, and particularly in recent months as the first reactor approaches completion, the UAE has tried to address every possible concern relating to security, emergency preparedness, health, and regulatory procedures. The UAE has hosted several IAEA [inspections](#) and presented new [plans](#) to the organisation, going beyond the minimum requirements and advertising its [responsiveness to feedback](#). The country sought to include the public throughout the process, organising [public meetings](#) with nuclear experts on hand to answer questions and public comments ranging from health and environmental safety to employment opportunities.

In addition to its energy programme's record of openness, the UAE has also been particularly outspoken against proliferation. It recently [endorsed](#) the Austrian Pledge

which seeks to start negotiations on a treaty to ban nuclear weapons worldwide. The UAE has also stated its support for making the Middle East a nuclear weapons free region.

In terms of its organisation, adherence to a schedule, and degree of transparency, the UAE's programme stands in sharp contrast to other nations in the region. Instead of developing nuclear weapons (Israel), allegedly attempting to secretly develop nuclear weapons (Iran), and threatening to procure nuclear weapons (Saudi Arabia), the UAE has pursued a peaceful programme under stringent international monitoring. Lost amidst the rest of the world's fear of nuclear proliferation, the UAE's programme rests in relative anonymity. Perhaps the lack of international coverage of this peaceful nuclear programme is a wasted opportunity for the West to prevent nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.

There is much [debate](#) regarding the actual likelihood of Middle Eastern nuclear proliferation, but the fear of proliferation is very real. If Western policymakers seriously wish to counter the potential threat, they should consider rewarding the best example the region has of a peaceful nuclear programme. Israel and Saudi Arabia are close allies of the West, particularly the United States. While the US must continue supporting its allies to achieve certain foreign policy goals, it does not necessarily need to [ease](#) Israel's nuclear ambiguity nor potentially support a Saudi programme through inaction.

Limiting support for allies that pursue nuclear weapons while increasing it for those that do not would send a clear message to others in the region, including Turkey and Egypt, that pursuing a weapons' programme is unacceptable and will end in international alienation. The US is already [strengthening its relationship](#) with the UAE, with increased sales of [high-tech](#) military equipment. Linking this strengthened relationship to the UAE's transparency in developing peaceful nuclear energy could have positive consequences for the rest of the Middle East.